

MUHAMMAD AND QUR'AN

Muslims view the Qur'an as a divine scripture revealed by God in the same way that many Christians and Jews view their scriptures. The Arabic word "Qur'an" means "the Recitations" or "the Revelations." It is a collection of the revelations that Muslims believe Muhammad received, starting in 610 when he was 40 years old. According to its own message, the Qur'an does not establish a new religion. Instead, it confirms and clarifies the truth of the original monotheism of Abraham, the focus of the Torah and Gospels.

Rather than a chronological narrative, the Qur'an addresses the social and inner condition of believers. Ethical and spiritual by turns, it occasionally refers to Biblical prophets, religious figures and events- Joseph in Egypt, Noah and the Flood, Jesus and the Virgin Mary, among many others- but it is not a book of history or narration. Rather, the Qur'an is concerned with people's spiritual destiny, the Day of Judgment, and what it means to believe in God and be a responsible person. In this last regard, the Qur'an occasionally lays down rules of behavior, but it is not a detailed book of laws like Leviticus or Deuteronomy.

Like many of the Biblical prophets, Muhammad described the experience of revelation as wrenching. He felt as if his "soul was being ripped away." He doubted its validity at first, until reassured first by his wife, then by a Christian ascetic, and eventually by the revelations themselves. All his life he distinguished between his personal opinions and the words conveyed to him in revelation.

Nonetheless, the year 610 became the watershed of Muhammad's life. Once he began to hear messages and convey them, nothing would ever be the same for him, or for the world. From a humble merchant and family man, the experience transformed him into a spiritual teacher, lawgiver, and ultimately leader of the tribes of the Arabian Peninsula. The book he delivered grew in stature from a text that was first reviled and ridiculed by many, to become the most memorized text in the world, a spiritual comfort to hundreds of millions, and the scripture for a global religion of more than 1.2 billion followers.

The Qur'an consists of several thousand verses arranged in 114 chapters, with the longest chapters coming first, and the shorter chapters near the end. According to Muslim tradition, its contents arrived unexpectedly to Muhammad a few verses at a time over weeks, months, and years. As this long, intermittent burst of sacred language

emerged, it was memorized and written down by others, and later reorganized into the book form we have now.

The Qur'an may be called rhymed prose. It is often said to have a striking beauty when heard in Arabic. Its deft use of associations, rhymes, near rhymes and shifts in cadence seems proof to many of its Divine origin. Some prominent figures during Muhammad's lifetime converted to Islam after hearing or reading a part of it. The language of the Qur'an quickly became the basis of Classical Arabic, both written and spoken.

For readers today, the Qur'an bears the stamp of its time and place, yet for many its message transcends time and history to express universal truths. An English version of the first ten verses of the ninety-first chapter, The Sun, reads:

Consider the sun and its radiance, and the moon reflecting the sun.

Consider the day as it reveals the world,
and the night that veils it in darkness.

Consider the sky and its wonderful composition,
the earth and its expanse.

Consider the human self and He Who perfected it
And how He imbued it with awareness
of what is right and wrong.

The one who helps this self to grow in a clean way
attains to happiness.

The one who buries it in darkness is really lost.

Today, the Qur'an is memorized and recited in classical Arabic by millions of people from grade-schoolers to professional performers. It is also the basis for much of the decoration in Islamic architecture around the world, where calligraphy beautifully executed in mortar and paint enhances the walls and corridors of mosques, schools, and

other public buildings. The central purpose, however, is not to provide decoration but rather to honor the Divine Word.

Muslims hear and use the Qur'an every day. The five daily prayers themselves all incorporate passages from it. The call to prayer, heard from minarets, is composed of Qur'anic lines and phrases. In view of its religious value for over a billion human beings, the Qur'an remains one of the modern world's most influential books.